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AUTHOR Ross, Helgola G.; Dalton, Mary Jo
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ABSTRACT

Research on adult sibling relationships suggests a concern about the quality of these relationships. The meaning of closeness in sibling relationships across the adult life span, its perceived origins, maintenance, and dynamics, were investigated in a sample of 55 adults ranging in age from 25 to 93 years. Semi-structured interviews with the subjects in small groups elicited perceptions of closeness to siblings, feelings of rivalry, perceptions of critical incidents and their consequences, and changes of feelings and interactions over time. Analyses revealed that most subjects perceived themselves as always having been close to their siblings, some as having grown more or less close over time, and a few as never having been close. Most commonly, closeness was perceived as a childhood development. A variety of factors led interactively to the development of closeness, contributed to its maintenance, and to its transformation of meaning over time. The social factors included norms, values and religious preferences of the culture; familial factors included child-rearing practices and family traditions; structural factors included the number of children in the family, their sex, age spacing, and birth order; personal-interactive factors included sharing of physical space, values, experiences, critical incidents, and developmental tasks; and personal factors included personal characteristics and special interests. The results suggest that sibling closeness differs from intimacy and gains stability from existing within the context of internalized values for family unity and sibling solidarity.
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PERCEIVED CLOSENESS IN ADULT SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS:
ORIGINS, MAINTENANCE, AND MEANING

Helgola G. Ross

Mary Jo Dalton

University of Cincinnati

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Perceived Closeness in Adult Sibling Relationships:

Origins, Maintenance, Meaning¹

An integral part of being human is a sense of belongingness to groups. Feelings of wholeness thus engendered feed into an individual's sense of importance, competence, being loved, and self-respect--in short, a sense of self-worth (e. g., Schutz, 1958). As families are our primary membership groups, being close to one's brothers and sisters may be especially important. Siblings know us sooner and longer than other peers (Cicirelli, 1979; Clark & Anderson, 1967; Ross & Dalton, in progress). In old age, they usually are the only persons who have known us all our lives, and who know life as it was when we were young. As such, they may play a crucial role in the validation of our perceptions of self and reality (Ross, Dalton, & Milgram, 1981).

The recent interest in sibling relationships across the adult life span (Adams, 1981; Arnstein, 1979; Bank & Kahn, 1982, Fishel, 1979; Lamb & Sutton Smith, 1982) suggests a concern about the quality of these relationships. The high priority given to family life and friendships may itself reflect a concern for the quality of life in other than economic terms (Campbell, 1981). Perhaps, in a world of increasingly diverse, confusing, and even contradictory values, "the intimate relationship has come to be seen as a refuge" (Levinger & Raush, 1977). Or does stress in its many forms, ever more prevalent in our lives, make a "focus of fidelity" (Bennis, in

¹ This research was in part supported by a grant from the University Research Council of the University of Cincinnati.

Harris, 1970) within the family fold increasingly attractive?

Whatever the ultimate reasons, the development of a science of close relationships is well under way (Harvey, 1981), and sibling relationships are part of it. It is the purpose of this paper to report exploratory findings on perceptions of closeness in sibling relationships through the adult life span--its perceived origins, maintenance, dynamics, and meanings.

Method

Subjects

Fifty-five individuals, ranging in age from 25 to 93 years, were recruited from a large Midwestern university community, two urban senior citizen centers, and a suburban retirement home. Participants were all white, middle class, and their education ranged from two years of high school to the doctorate. Their ages, sex, and number of siblings are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

Participants met in 13 small groups, each consisting of four to six individuals. Two groups each were composed of persons in their twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. Five groups were composed of participants sixty years or older. Group sessions lasted for two to two and a half hours. They were led by two investigators. Semi-structured interviews--with the investigators focussing discussions, probing issues, and stimulating reflections--elicited the participants' sense of closeness to their siblings, feel-

ings of rivalry, perceptions of critical incidents and their consequences, and changes of feelings and interactions over time. All sessions were audio-taped with the permission of the participants. Participants also completed questionnaires providing demographic information about themselves and their siblings.

Analysis

Tapes were transcribed and analyzed. As part of a larger study (also see Ross, 1981; Ross & Milgram, 1980, 1982; and Ross, Dalton and Milgram, 1981) this study emphasizes the identification of topics, consistent patterns, dynamics (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975) and particularly salient events (Guba, 1978). Specifically, this investigation focusses on perceptions of closeness in sibling relationships: their origins, maintenance, dynamics, and meaning.

Results

Perceived Life-Span Patterns of Closeness

Three life-span patterns of closeness were identified. Interestingly, participants insisted on talking about closeness to siblings within the context of the family. In that sense, closeness was identified as applying to all siblings, and more generally to the family. In addition, certain brothers or sisters were singled out as favorites, or as particularly close because of shared significant experiences. The patterns of family and sibling closeness (presented in Table 2) are having always felt close to the family or to a sibling, having never felt close to the family or to a sibling, or closeness to either having changed over one's lifetime. Clearly, closeness to the family

was more frequently reported than closeness to a particular sibling, although the number of siblings participants could have felt close to was much larger than the number of families involved. Family closeness was also seen as more stable than closeness to specific siblings. Closeness to the family changed only rarely during one's life-time, while in particular sibling relationships such changes were the predominant pattern. Conversely, very few families were perceived as never having been close, while lack of closeness to a sibling was relatively more frequent. In absolute terms it was quite rare, however.

Insert Table 2 about here

Origins of Closeness

Most commonly, closeness was perceived as developing during childhood. The most powerful contributor to the development of feelings of closeness at this time was the framework of the family within which siblings grew up. Values, religious preferences, and family traditions, often held as unconscious assumptions about family and sibling relationships, contributed to the kind and degree of closeness expected among siblings. Family interaction patterns, such as the parents' child-rearing practices, modeling of acceptable behavior, abstaining from favoritism and preferential treatment, and actually teaching children strategies for getting along with each other facilitated closeness among sisters and brothers. Experiences shared by siblings--as a family, in groups, or as individual pairs--were by far the

most frequently reported activities developing closeness to the family and between siblings. Such experiences consist of playing, of activities involving common interests, of being exposed to the same school and church, and the variety of events that family members engage in daily. It was during these times of sharing that values were imparted, behavioral expectations were taught and practiced, and family interaction patterns emerged. Close physical proximity, from shared bedrooms to living in isolated geographical areas, enhanced further closeness to family and siblings.

Critical incidents, such as a parent's death or illness, a divorce, an accident, can have positive or negative consequences for sibling relationships (Ross, 1981). When a father died while his children were still young, the attempt by an older son to take over the father's role was resented by his younger siblings. Alternatively, successful surrogate parenting can lead to a special kind of closeness between brothers and/or sisters whose ages vary. However, if children are far apart in age, if they become separated during childhood, or if parents treat certain siblings or groups of siblings preferentially, closeness may not have the opportunity to develop or may be prevented from coming about (for descriptions of families whose interaction patterns prevented closeness, see Henry, 1971).

The number of children in a family, their sex, age spacing, and birth order mediate the development of closeness. Such structural variables provide the basis for grouping children by age, sex, common interests, and dispositions (the oldest kids, the girls, the athletes, the intellectuals). Grouping can bring about increased opportunities for shared experiences and thus

increase closeness. It can also foster closeness within groups while diminishing it across groups. Especially if certain groups are treated preferentially by both parents (boys getting more freedom and encouragement than girls), the preferred group easily takes on the elitist qualities of cliques (Ross & Milgram, 1982).

Age influences the meaning of sibling closeness. In childhood, it is generally an attribute of the family, especially if family unity and sibling solidarity are valued highly and these values are translated into behavior. The foundations for closeness between specific siblings are also laid. Favorite sisters and brothers spend much time with each other and get to know each other well. In adolescence, closeness tends to become more an attribute of specific relationships, although family closeness continues to provide the general structure within which sibling closeness occurs (Ross, Dalton & Milgram, 1981). Helping each other meet developmental challenges through comparisons, modeling, advice, and talking through of issues and concerns helps siblings form their own identities. Seeing oneself as similar as well as different contributes to the process. Mentoring often takes place, especially if there is some age difference. In general, mentoring, along with surrogate parenting, is the primary means for building close relationships between siblings who are spaced a number of years apart. Favorite siblings may now become friends, helping each other find dates, or good-naturedly competing for them.

In adulthood, an increasing sense of selfhood and the physical separa-

tion occasioned by siblings leaving the parental home makes closeness in particular relationships more a function of choice and personal commitment. Such personal commitments are made to one or more special siblings but not to all of them. Yet, practically all siblings are included in the commitment to the family whose framework continues to exert its influence.

Only rarely does closeness originate in adulthood. When it does, a conscious decision on the part of at least one sibling often initiates the process. Frequently, issues that have kept siblings apart need to be resolved first. Once siblings have made contact, many of the factors contributing to the origins of closeness in childhood, especially shared experiences, interests, common goals, and frequent contact, are also operative at this later age.

General factors contributing to the development of closeness are reported in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Maintenance of Closeness

Many of the factors leading to the development of closeness also served to maintain it. However, being no longer part of the parents' home--which provides a built-in foundation for closeness through physical proximity and common rules for behavior--requires personal commitments to the relationships. To what degree such commitments are made depends on the value placed on family unity and sibling solidarity during childhood. The internalization of these values, the memories of shared childhood experiences, and

the relationship already established in childhood are the foundation on which the maintenance of closeness in adulthood rests. In addition, family reunions, regular--if not frequent--contact through visiting, writing, and calling each other appeared to be a vicarious sharing of experiences which extended the dynamics of childhood and youth into adult years, and may have projected the closer contact yet to come in old age. Reunions served the purpose of integrating the siblings' spouses and children, of reminiscing and thus keeping childhood experiences and family traditions alive, of adding further common experiences and keeping each other up-to-date. Sharing of accomplishments and frustrations, of concerns over the state of the world and the state of one's own being, generated a variety of feelings, including trust, liking, gratitude, respect, and pride.

Siblings also maintained closeness through investments of time, energy, and money, and by supporting each other in numerous ways. For example, physical assistance ranged from fixing faucets to taking care of each other during times of illness or crises; counsel ranged from advice on what college to attend to empathy when an early romance broke up to moving in with a sister at the time of her husband's unexpected death. Certainly, some types of assistance were facilitated if siblings lived close and had easy access to each other. However, physical proximity played a more complex role. It is necessary, though not sufficient, for the development of closeness, either in childhood or at a later age. And while many saw it as contributing to the maintenance of closeness, too, living far apart but planning care-

fully choreographed meetings was preferred by a few others whose personality or value differences made meetings problematical.

Critical incidents and shared responsibilities, such as helping each other through the sickness and death of a sibling or spouse, caring for aging or ailing parents, and ultimately sharing their deaths and settling inheritance issues also affected closeness. Successfully negotiating these challenges resulted in acceptance and trust which, in turn, resulted in greater degrees of openness and willingness to be vulnerable to the other--and thus in potentially deeper levels of closeness. For most, this process is a matter of degree, with the success of any challenge becoming both an effect of already existing closeness and a contributor to its maintenance and growth.

That "the family" continued to play a crucial role in these sibling relationships is clearly evidenced by the role terms siblings applied to each other. Though some were seen as surrogate parents, as models, teachers, or advisors, and a number of siblings became friends, the overwhelming majority spoke of their siblings simply as "kin."

This sense of kinship was especially strong in old age, which brought renewed significance and feelings of closeness to sibling relationships (Cicirelli, 1977). During early adulthood interpersonal closeness shifts from the original family members to spouses and children. But children leave home to form their own families, and spouses die. Siblings, especially older women, frequently help each other with the developmental tasks

of old age, and closeness becomes a function of support networks and, to a lesser degree, intimacy between siblings. It is likely that siblings also affirm and validate each others' perceptions of self and reality (Ross, Dalton & Milgram, 1981).

The factors contributing to the maintenance of closeness are summarized in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion

Perceived closeness in adult sibling relationships, despite the identification of many factors and dynamics contributing to its origins and maintenance, remains an elusive concept.

Contributing to the difficulties of defining the concept and its functions in sibling relationships is the complexity of factors which, interactively, lead to its development and contribute to its maintenance and its concomitant transformation in meaning over the life span. Social factors--the norms of the culture and socio-economic status, including assumptions, values, religious preferences within which families raise their children--are the most pervasive and often unconscious factors affecting sibling relationships. Within these, familial factors--the geographical setting the family lives in, the parents' child-rearing practices, family histories and traditions, parental dispositions and needs--play a role. Structural factors--the number of children in the family, their sex, age spacing, and birth order (Rosenberg

& Sutton-Smith, 1973)--mediate the familial and especially the personal-interactive factors contributing to closeness. Personal-interactive factors--the sharing of physical proximity, of values, experiences, institutions, and of the developmental tasks of growing up--contribute more directly to closeness between siblings. Personal factors--such as interests, abilities, competencies, and other personality characteristics, as well as individual responses to the previous factors--further complicate the dynamics.

What, then, does closeness in sibling relationships mean? Levinger & Raush (1977) in a report of a symposium on close relationships claim that a definition of closeness must contain at least the following social, physical, and psychological components: frequent interaction (social) between spatially near partners (physical) who share significant goals, exchange personal disclosures, and care deeply about each other (psychological). Although it is not clear what exactly each of these components means, it is rather obvious that not all participants claiming to be close to their siblings meet these criteria. Is that a flaw in the definition? In the way the data were collected? Or is there something inherently different in the meaning of closeness among siblings? Let us examine how the criteria apply to the findings of this study.

While the physical criterion is usually met in childhood, especially for siblings who are relatively close in age, it is more a conformance to the letter than the spirit of the thing as siblings have little choice over their whereabouts. The other period of life when many siblings are physically

close to each other is old age. Fewer siblings live close to each other or together during the middle years. The social interaction component can be met through actually doing things with each other, through writing and telephoning, and symbolically through reminiscing. If long-distance contact is sufficient as a sole means of interacting is questionable. How frequently, consistently, and continually it needs to be reinforced by physical nearness may depend on individual differences in social needs, communication skills, the soundness of the foundation laid in childhood, and family pressures. To what extent the social component can be met symbolically is one of the more intriguing questions raised by this research. Certainly, elderly siblings whose sisters or brothers had died seemed to be able to keep their memories alive. And during the middle years when many siblings see each other infrequently, no loss to the relationships resulted. Rather, closeness had become latent during this period.

The most interesting components of closeness are the psychological ones. Shared significant goals are tried out by many siblings during their adolescent and young adult years, especially with respect to occupational and marital roles. Once these are established, however, they become part of each sibling's self-concept rather than a property of the relationships. What is shared is more a process of becoming, of finding oneself. Sometimes, this sharing continues through other stages of development as well; often it is picked up again in old age. In their middle years siblings do not so much share common as they have parallel goals--forging a successful career,

creating a satisfying marriage, raising healthy and successful children, maybe finding a second profession. Only infrequently do siblings go into business together or build a life with each other--i. e., share interdependent goals. Not until the need arises to take care of an ailing or aging parent may a significant common goal emerge. There is one exception, however. Siblings make commitments to the family relatively early in life and usually continue this commitment through the adult years. As this commitment is more frequently, and possibly more strongly, made to the family as a whole rather than to individual siblings, the common goal may be family unity and general sibling solidarity. Only within that are certain siblings singled out for more intimate relationships.

In contrast to commitments to family goals, exchanging personal disclosures depends on commitments to specific brothers or sisters. Such commitments appear to be more defining characteristics of friendship than of brother- or sisterhood (Ross & Dalton, in progress). Although some of our participants clearly acknowledged that they saw certain sisters or brothers as friends, most were not perceived as such, and personal disclosures were relatively infrequent. Interfering with a desire to disclose to siblings may be differences in personality and interest--after all, none of us can choose a sibling. More important may be possible threats in the form of critical incidents arising out of these relationships (Ross, 1981) which amount to betrayals of trust, expectations, and values. As it seems virtually impossible to leave siblings, as one might leave a friend or even

a mate (Ross & Dalton, in progress). and as such conflicts in sibling relationships are likely to generate pressures from other members of the family, disclosing may be more of a risk than many siblings wish to take.

Caring deeply about one another has its basis in childhood and increases if siblings are able to assist each other in their quest for identity during adolescence and young adulthood. One expression of caring during middle age may be the ability to let go--to leave siblings to their own professions, marriages, families, and friends and to resume interacting more frequently and intensely at a later time. In the middle years, critical incidents are times of special promise or danger. The death of a parent, inheritance issues, physical, financial, and psychological aid for an ailing parent, are events which bring about positive or negative consequences. Often, these consequences seem as much an outcome of the pre-existing relationship as of the incidents themselves (Ross, 1981). More gratitude, love, closeness and caring were expressed by siblings who had successfully managed their relationships through these experiences than for any other accomplishment during the middle years.

Caring for each other in old age was quite evident in most of our respondents' relationships. Participants were not close to every sibling. But most were in frequent contact--by letter, phone, through visits--with at least one favorite sibling. Not uncommonly, all still living siblings participated in this support for each other, even those who had been shunned for periods of time during earlier years. Physical nearness might have been desired

more frequently, but visits were curtailed by falling health. However, "intimacy at a distance," as Deibel (1967) called it, was certainly available for most elderly participants who had living siblings. A good deal was expressed for already deceased siblings through memories. This greater availability of siblings for each other in old age as compared to earlier life stages may reflect a reemergence of the siblings' importance for each other as interactions with others decreased (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Lowenthal, 1964; Rosow, 1970). As spouses and friends die, and work environments no longer meet social needs, the few remaining ties may take on new and special meanings (Sheldon et al, 1975). There seems to be a not often consciously acknowledged need of putting one's life and one's primary relationships in order (Ross, Dalton & Milgram, 1981).

Perceived closeness in sibling relationships is defined by Levinger & Raush's (1977) components of close interpersonal relationships only part of the time for some of the siblings. Some siblings--favorites, those who become friends--fit the psychological criteria of closeness quite well. Even for them, the social and physical criteria do not hold throughout life; rather, they are met for given periods of time, or at certain life stages. Marked life stage differences in intimacy were found by Lowenthal & Weiss (1976), suggesting that the meaning of closeness changes through the life span. This certainly seems to be true for siblings, although much work remains to be done to identify factors, patterns, and dynamics more clearly. Furthermore, variables other than those suggested by Levinger and Raush

may have to be postulated to account for particular aspects of closeness in sibling relationships. Especially those aspects dealing with family unity and sibling solidarity need to be explained. The overwhelming importance of the family, stressed by so many of the participants in the study, conditions any sibling relationship existing within it. Attempt the properties of the family with respect to sibling relationships in terms of an explanatory construct--the family space--are in preparation (Ross, in progress).

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Table 1: Age, Sex, and Number of Siblings of Participants

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
<u>Age (in years)</u>	
20 - 29	3
30 - 39	15
40 - 54	8
55 - 69	7
70 - 93	<u>22</u>
Total	55
<u>Sex</u>	
Males	19
Females	<u>36</u>
Total	55
<u>Number of Siblings</u>	
1	11
2 - 3	19
4 - 5	12
6 - 9	10
10 - 17	<u>3</u>
Total	55

Table 2: Perceived Life Span Patterns of Closeness

<u>Patterns of Closeness to the Family</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Family has always been close	26
Closeness to family changed over lifetime	5
Family has never been close	8
 <u>Patterns of Closeness to Siblings</u>	
Sibling has always been close	21
Closeness to sibling changed over lifetime	72
Sibling has never been close	16

Table 3: Factors Contributing to the Origins of Closeness

Descriptors	Frequency
Shared family values	8
Shared personal values	14
Shared family experiences	29
Shared experiences with subgroups of siblings	21
Shared experiences with particular siblings	43
Shared experiences in school and church	21
Shared physical space	17
Shared critical incidents	14

Table 4: Factors Contributing to Maintenance of Closeness

Descriptors	Frequency
<u>Commonalities</u>	
Shared family values	15
Shared personal values	13
Shared interests and goals	13
Shared personal characteristics	12
Shared responsibilities	12
Shared access/proximity	12
Shared critical incidents	10
<u>Commitments to</u>	
Family values	56
Family traditions and rituals	30
Regular communication with siblings	53
<u>Investments of</u>	
Time	20
Energy	27
Money	22
<u>Interaction Behaviors</u>	
Contact--visiting	28
writing/calling	32
promoting family reunions	19
disclosures	9
Support--physical help	20
emotional/psychological counsel	44
protection	13
mutual responsibilities	9

Table 4: Factors Contributing to the Maintenance of Closeness (cont'd)

Descriptor	Frequency
<u>Feeling States</u>	
Trust	9
Respect	10
Gratitude	5
Liking	16
Pride	15
<u>Roles</u>	
Kinship	118
Friendship	19
Surrogate Parenting	8
Teacher/Model	7
Advisor	11